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Adler on Freedom

When I was asked to prepare this paper I saw it as an opportunity to pay tribute to a man whose philosophical work over the years, while it has had a tremendous effect, has not yet had anything like the effect it deserves. There are various reasons for this, some quite incidental, but one at least is a trifle unsavory. You know the story of Thales who, in order to show that the philosopher could be an entrepreneur if he chose, cornered all the olive presses and made a killing at harvest time. We easily imagine the reaction of the olive growers. But ask yourself what Thales' fellow philosophers would have thought.

Mortimer has borne with Stoic dignity the burden of being the most highly paid philosopher in the United States. Thales would have been proud of him. But perhaps academic philosophers, nursing economic and other grievances, have been less receptive to what Mortimer Adler had to say. For the best of reasons and highest of motives of course. Then, too, *Time* long ago branded Adler a Peeping Thomist. In short, the entrepreneurial Adler and crafty Thales have been in the same boat, doubtless comforting themselves with Thales' lost work on celestial navigation.

Perhaps you will recognize the allusion to Chesterton's reply when asked the famous question: "If you were stranded on a desert island and could have only one book what title would you choose?" GKC did not hesitate. He would like a book entitled *How to Build a Boat*. That has an Adlerian ring to it, not simply because Chesterton would of course have needed one other volume, namely, *How to Read a Book*, but also because the reply has that down to earth, feet on the ground, let's get on with it tone that one associates with the philosophical production of Mortimer Adler.

When I accepted this assignment, I imagined myself writing the paper in the warm confines of the Maritain Center on the seventh floor of the Hesburgh Library, to which we shall all repair after this session. There the *opera omnia* of Adler would be at my elbow as well as those of Jacques Maritain and Yves R. Simon. As one does when such projects are but a

" " " *coming before you on this occasion*
twinkle in the mind's eye, I imagined WITH a comprehensive overview of Adler's discussions through the years on the concept of freedom. To do this well, it would be necessary to take up allied topics and I would be able to show and not simply assert that some of his books that seem to have been mere by-blows of a collective effort are all but definitive treatises. I remember thinking, when *Some Questions About Language* came out in 1976, that here was a book which, better than any other in that seemingly overworked field, laid out the issues, indicated solutions, and would define subsequent discussion. (The book was dedicated to Jacques Maritain.) Similar praise can be heaped on other works of Mortimer Adler, and I hoped to use this occasion to do some heaping.

This is not the paper I had hoped to deliver. When I sat down to write, I found myself, not on this campus and in the Maritain Center, but high above Cayuga's waters warming the Kaneb Chair in Catholic Studies. Cornell has an excellent library, but nothing like the Maritain Collection here, with its repository of Adleriana gathered in grand indifference to the Library of Congress, to say nothing of the Dewey Decimal system. I do not mean to suggest, of course, that if I had stayed home I would have written the paper I hoped to write, one that would be worthy of Adler's work. But perhaps the distance between cup and lip would have been somewhat less.

I. The Adlerian Voice

To pick up any work of Mortimer Adler, early, middle, or late, is to be called to order. One imagines him looking at his watch, waiting for us to settle down, and then, when he has our complete attention, beginning. He is a schoolmaster, a *scholasticus*. There is work to be done and we are here to do it.

Consider the 1965 volume *The Conditions of Philosophy* with its subtitle: "Its Checkered Past, Its Present Disorder, and Its Future Promise." At the very outset, Adler acknowledges that he seems embarked on a tiresome, even trite, exercise. How many dozens of attempts have been made over recent centuries to overcome the so-called "scandal of philosophy"? That is, the undeniable fact that the history of philosophy presents us with a cacophony of voices, endless disputes, seemingly no generally accepted solutions.

This situation leads some to take on the burden of remedying the problem by constructing out of whole cloth, as it seems, a worldview. Others become disciples of these sturdy souls so that we have not simply Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, and Hegel, but Cartesians, Lockians (Turnkeys), Leibnitzians, Humeans, Kantians, and Hegelians.

I think it fair to say that Adler from the very outset of his studies at

Columbia was struck by this scandal. And, going by the excerpts from his youthful writings he gives us in *Philosopher at Large*, he meant to do something about it. The confidence he showed not only in his own reason, but in human reason itself, to move through and beyond this dissonance and uncommunicating diversity fairly lifts from the page. The issues philosophy addresses are simply too important to be left in this parlous condition. This state of affairs cannot be allowed to continue. But how to remedy it?

Mortimer Adler seems never to have been tempted by the prospect of inventing an Adlerian worldview. Nothing could be farther from his outlook than the Cartesian willingness to wipe the slate clean, to pick the lint from his own navel, and, madly to mix more metaphors, forge in the smithy of his soul the uncreated conscience of his race. What Adler did, instinctively at first and then with growing awareness of the method, was to look for clues within the diversity of philosophical positions as to how the situation could be bettered.

In short, he became a dialectician in the Aristotelian sense. Like Aristotle, he refused to think that intelligent human beings were simply in disagreement with one another on basic issues. Like Aristotle at the outset of most of the treatises, e.g., the *Physics*, the *De anima*, the *Metaphysics*, Adler wants us first to acquaint ourselves with what has been said. He has an Aristotelian confidence that beneath the surface disagreements will be found at least tacitly held common ground. But if this approach has Aristotelian origins, the task in the mid-twentieth century was enormously different from what it was in the mid-fourth century B.C.

II. The Idea of Freedom

The task as it thus appeared to Adler was vast and it could not be accomplished by a single person. A collective effort was required. It was this recognition that led to the formation of the Institute for Philosophical Research and his formal departure from the Academy. I say formal because some of his most important books are the result of the Britannica Lectures delivered at the University of Chicago. The first result of the formation of his *equipe* was *The Idea of Freedom*, the two-volume work Adler wrote against the background of the Institute's research, and which appeared in 1958 and 1961. (Adler has observed in his autobiography that the interval between the appearance of the two volumes prevented the work from having maximum impact.)

Book One of Volume One of *The Idea of Freedom* is a masterful statement of the method Adler hit upon. His Institute's approach to the study of any controverted issue, in this case of freedom, is characterized as follows:

- it is a non-historical study of ideas;

- it is a non-philosophical approach to philosophical ideas;
- it strives to achieve a non-partisan treatment of philosophical positions or views;
- it tries to approximate comprehensiveness in scope;
- it limits itself to what is explicit or implicit in written works.

Adler and his team would dare to ask precisely what disagreement and controversy are and what sort of agreement he envisaged.

It is the distinction between dialectical and doctrinal agreement that will surely catch the eye. What Adler hopes to achieve is agreement that the issue has been fairly and accurately stated, and this provides the context within which future discussion can take place. He cites this comment of Jacques Maritain on the neutrality of the language of dialectical formulation. In order to be neutral, Maritain wrote, it must be

“echoless,” i.e. strictly limited to what is barely stated and deprived of any further doctrinal overtones or connotations. Just because such assertions or formulas, having no actual philosophic life of their own, are, so to speak, only in potency in regard to some philosophical wholeness or totality, every philosopher in the group concerned can subscribe to them; but in doing so each will infuse into them the connotations or overtones peculiar to his own entire doctrine, and foreign to the doctrine of his colleagues (*IF*, I, 68).

Taken just as such, this would not seem to be worth it. Indeed, it echoes with some of Maritain’s hopes for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In that case, he might seem to be saying that an agreement can be had on statements even though there is radical disagreement as to the meanings of the terms in the statements. Of course, he did not mean anything so vacuous, and we can be sure that Adler does not either. What Maritain meant and what Adler went on to say he meant was that it is “only through the medium of constructed formulations which are neutral in language and intent that philosophers can be brought to the recognition of their dialectical agreements as well as of their doctrinal agreements and disagreements. Without this medium as a *tertium quid*, each philosopher tends to remain in the world of his own thought and is conversant there with other philosophers only in the guise which he gives them when he imports them into his own world” (*IF*, I, 68).

What is the most indeterminate and neutral statement of the idea of freedom?

A man is free who has in himself the ability or power to make what he does his own action and what he achieves his own property (*IF*, II, 16).

The development of the controversies is in terms of freedom as self-realization, freedom as self-perfection, political liberty, and collective freedom.

Obviously, the only way to profit from this massive effort is to read the book according to the method of the master's *How to Read a Book*.

What continues to dazzle in this effort is the steady determination to discover in twenty-five hundred years of discussion the precise nature of the controversies and conflicts. That a man and his cohorts should have devoted long years of their lives to this self-effacing effort to overcome the scandal of philosophy is heroic. We should expect that discussions of freedom since 1961 would be appreciably different from before, that discussants would avail themselves of the vast groundclearing dialectical achievement of *The Idea of Freedom* and get on with it. I do not think one can say this has happened. The freedom not to read a book may have been overlooked. Has Adler's career been a quixotic one; must we see him as one who sought to present a great gift to the philosophical community only to be spurned or, worse, ignored?

III. The Results

I don't think we should pass quickly over this point. The success of Adler's effort cannot be likened to, say, a poet who works in obscurity producing his oeuvre, which is then effectively ignored by mankind. Reception apart, the poetry either is or is not good. And, should this ultimately be recognized, say on the order of the discovery of Catullus or the belated reputation of Hopkins, they are welcomed into a tradition of poetic work.

But Adler did not seek simply to make his own contribution to the ongoing tradition of philosophy. His was the far more ambitious task of introducing order into the philosophical community so that its future might be different from its past. There is a thematically practical aim underlying his effort. His success will be measured in terms of how much or how little he has effected what he sought to effect. And I suggest that, to date, the results are not favorable.

One of the greatest obstacles has been the obscurantist disinterest among professional philosophers. I recall reading a review of Walker Percy's collection of essays on language in which a professional philosopher condescendingly offered to provide Percy with a reading list if he wished seriously to get into the problem of language. Adler, of course, has all the appropriate academic credentials, he has been on the faculty of two of the best universities in this country, but some professional philosophers regard him as something of an interloper. This is unfortunate and one can only hope that the work of the Institute for Philosophical Research will find a warmer welcome in academe than has been the case till

now.

Fortunately, if the jury is still out on the success of the Institute's effort to restructure the way philosophical controversy is conducted, there is another side of Adler's effort that can be pronounced successful here and now.

Adler's sustained dedication to the dialectical efforts of the Institute never diverted him from the ultimate aim, which was to achieve substantive agreement on philosophical matters. The dialectic was meant to overcome the scandal of philosophy by providing philosophers with a neutral statement of the *status quaestionis*, which would then influence their future substantive work. It can be said that one undeniable beneficiary of the efforts to Adler the dialectician is Adler the philosopher.

IV. The Britannica Lectures

The original sin of Adler's academic career was that he wrote a best-seller, *How to Read a Book*. This made him as welcome among philosophers as Barbara Tuchman is among academic historians. I once heard a young historian say of Philip Hughes, the great church historian, that he wasn't a real historian. It wasn't simply that Hughes was readable; he didn't have a pedantic bone in his body. Adler gets a firm grip on his reader's lapels from the first sentence, but from that point on it is the flow of the narrative that holds the reader. Mortimer Adler has the great knack of communicating difficult ideas in a jargonless language understandable by any intelligent reader. This is unforgiveable.

Not only that, what he communicates is both his own confidence in reason and arguments that enable the reader to share that confidence. For contrast, look at Thomas Nagel's *What Does It All Mean?* Here we have a professional philosopher of great talent writing a book for the masses on the main issues of philosophy. Of Nagel it can be said, he's no Mortimer Adler. I don't mean that he gives us philosophical jargon; the problem is the same as that of Bertrand Russell in his popular efforts. The answer Nagel gives to his question is: probably nothing but it doesn't really matter. The jaded skepticism of academic philosophy makes even thinner gruel when it is freed from the protective garb of jargon.

Brand Blanshard was among those who praised *The Idea of Freedom* for its fairness and objectivity. Adler the dialectician does not load the case. But when Adler does philosophy he profits from that vast dialectical working up of 2,500 years of philosophy—he may be more knowledgeable than any other living philosopher about philosophy's past—and he provides his reader with the elements of a substantive answer to the great questions.

Just consider the titles of his non-dialectical work: *The Difference of Man*

and the Difference it Makes; The Time of Our Lives; The Common Sense of Politics; How to Think About God; The Angels and Us. This is a partial list. All of these are extremely good; some, like *The Time of Our Lives*, are, I will not say Great Books because there are only a hundred of those, but better than anything else done on the subject in our day.

V. One Popular Statement

Let me conclude, then, with a discussion of freedom to be found in one of Adler's recent books addressed to a wide audience, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*. (If Adler has a gift for titles, he is delightful in his subtitles too: "Basic Errors in Modern Thought—How They Came About, Their Consequences, and How to Avoid Them.") This was a Book of the Month Club alternate, which indicates that, whatever our judgment on the success of Adler's effort to alter philosophical discourse generally, he is hugely successful in the works that profit from his own advice.

Chapter 7 is concerned with Freedom of Choice and anyone who has read the two volumes of *The Idea of Freedom* will notice how it provides the background for the discussion. Adler begins by alluding to the unquestionableness of freedom as a fact: people think of freedom as something that cannot be denied. We are able to do as we please, but of course unless you are a multimillionaire you cannot avail yourself of freedom of the press on the level of the Ochs or Hearst families. But even a slave is free in some ways. This freedom, like political freedom, is affected by circumstances, as freedom to will as one ought and freedom of choice are not. It is the last which is most controversial. "Freedom of choice consists in always being able to choose otherwise" (TP 147).

The claim to have a right to freedom seems to refer only to what Adler calls circumstantial freedoms, not to moral liberty or freedom of choice. But the claim to have a right to other freedoms makes little sense if we do not have freedom of choice. "If we do not have freedom of choice, what reason can be given for our right to do as we please or to exercise a voice in our own government?" (TP 147). With that connection, Adler can stress that the controversy over free choice has far-reaching consequences.

Is the denial of free choice a philosophical error that can simply be pointed out and corrected? No. "I cannot show that the exponents of free choice are right and the determinists who oppose free choice are wrong. The philosophical defect here is not so much a demonstrable philosophical error as a manifest misunderstanding of the issue itself" (TP 148).

What is the misunderstanding? Those who question free will on the basis of physical determinism fail to understand "that the exponents of free choice place the action of will outside the domain of physical phenomena studied by science" (TP 149). If free choice were a physical

event and if all physical events are causally determined, then the proponents of free choice would be in trouble. If mind and will are not physical, it is another matter. Nonetheless, some acts of mind and some acts of will are necessitated. Mind cannot withhold assent to self-evident truth; the will cannot not will the good, the *totum bonum*. With respect to all goods other than the comprehensive good, with regard to partial goods, the will is not necessitated. This indeterminacy of will with respect to partial goods is not physical indeterminacy. This is what Adler means by saying that the denial of free choice is based on a misunderstanding of what its proponents claim. Adler concludes that the defense of free choice is sounder than its denial. If there were a sound argument on behalf of determinism, the mind's necessary acceptance of it would differ from causal determinacy.

The discussion is of course schematic, but it enables us to see how dialectic operates within the effort to achieve a doctrinal truth. Alternatives are carefully designated and the pros and cons of each developed. One alternative is judged sounder because of what is offered on its behalf and the discussion ends with a kind of *reductio* of the naysayer's position.

Adler's reader comes away with some sense of how a rational defense of what he holds in practice can be formulated. The suggestion of the complexity with which the issue could be developed is not accompanied with any skepticism as to the outcome. Adler does not endeavor to replace the beliefs of the plain man, to make his mind a blank slate and confer on his reader his first true judgment. Like the Aristotelian he basically is, Adler assumes that everybody already knows certain things and that philosophy provides clarification and defense of these truths. He is not shy to say that modern philosophy has generated many mistakes about basic matters.

VI. An American Philosopher

Let me conclude with the remark that there is something quintessentially American about Adler's work. His *Paideia* program aims at enabling his fellow citizens to fulfill their tasks as members of a free society. The sturdy confidence that led him through the thickets of philosophical controversies over 2,500 years toward a clarification of the points at issue was meant to lead on to the resolution of the major differences. The practical importance of this is that a society such as ours cannot function as it should if there is fundamental confusion about the concepts and truths on which it is founded. So it is that Mortimer Adler became a public philosopher, an intellectual who dared to engage in the great conversation all his fellow citizens, in the conviction that common sense is indeed common. That it is uncommon for a philosopher to say such things nowadays is a sign of how grateful we should be for Mortimer Adler.